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SUBJECT: NAJAF GOVERNOR BRIEFS PRT - AYATOLLAH AL-SISTANI EXPLICITLY ENCOURAGES COOPERATION WITH COALITION FORCES

HILLAH 00000015 001.2 OF 002

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REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

This is a PRT Reporting Cable

¶11. (S) SUMMARY: During a meeting with the PRT February 7, Najaf Governor Asa'd Abu Gilel briefed about the Iraqi Vice President's meeting with Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani, preparation for the upcoming al-Arbaeen gathering in Karbala city, and the Iraqi VP's meeting with Najaf officials. A key point that the Najaf Governor underscored he "was not afraid" to convey to the PRT was of the Grand Ayatollah's support for Coalition Forces. Al-Sistani explicitly stated during his meeting with VP Adel Abdul Mahdi that he "encourages everyone to cooperate with Coalition Forces," conveyed Governor Gilel. The Governor stated that "his Eminence" has also emphasized on several other occasions to Najaf officials the importance of cooperation with the U.S. Secondly, Governor Gilel gave details of the security ramp up they are planning in expectation of the eight million pilgrims heading to Karbala during Arbaeen on February 25, an event that commemorates the 40th day after the death of Imam Al-Hussein. During the VP's meeting with provincial officials, he discussed the security planning for Arbaeen, respect for the role of the constitution, and the need to develop the private sector. END SUMMARY

IRAQ VP MAHDI MET WITH GRAND AYATOLLAH AL-SISTANI IN NAJAF

¶12. (S) On February 7, PRT Team Leader and PRTOffs held a meeting at the office of Najaf Governor, Asa'd Abu Gilel, coinciding with a visit by Iraq Vice President Adel Abdul Mahdi that same morning (Embassy Baghdad will report readout of this meeting SepTel.) During the meeting, the Governor summarized to the PRT the exchange that took place between VP Mahdi and Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani the previous day. He stated that al-Sistani expressed dissatisfaction with the services the government is providing to the populace. In addition, he also expressed concern for the high level of unemployment in Iraq. Most importantly, the Governor added, the Grand Ayatollah explicitly expressed to the VP that he "encourages everyone to maintain cooperation with Coalition Forces." The Governor added that he was not afraid to convey the message openly, as on other occasions, "his Eminence" has reiterated the same "advice." Governor Gilel also underscored that security protection for al-Sistani and the other three Ayatollahs in Najaf has increased since the end of January. (Note: In January, there was a failed attempt to kill an al-Sistani aide in Karbala. End note)

SECURITY RAMPS UP FOR AL-ARBAAIN - EIGHT MILLION VISITORS
EXPECTED

13. (SBU) One of the main purposes of the VP's visit to Najaf was to coordinate security measures for the upcoming Al-Arbaeen pilgrimage when eight million Shias are expected this year to reach on foot Imam al-Hussein's mosque in Karbala to commemorate the 40th day of the death of Imam Hussein, grandson of the Prophet, killed in the battle of Taf near Karbala. Shia Muslims believe that it took their ancestors forty days to find the beheaded bodies of Imam Hussein and his 72 soldiers for a proper burial, and deem the occasion one of their holiest observances. Beginning February 16, one side of all Najaf to Karbala artery roads will be closed to accommodate the pilgrims, with heightened security measures. Additional military and police forces from Baghdad and Najaf will arrive to join Karbala's police for a two-week period. The governorates have set up big tents along the way, opened all day and night, to provide free food and a place to rest for all. Shia Muslims believe that the pilgrimage to Karbala is a time to mourn and repent for their ancestors, who they believe let down Imam Hussein when they did not journey to meet him outside the city of Karbala, causing his eventual death. Governor Gilel noted that during Saddam's regime, Shia pilgrims were forbidden to commemorate Arbaeen, and some were jailed and executed for the act. VP Mahdi met with Najaf officials and security commanders to help ensure that the two weeks of Arbaeen progress smoothly. They expect three million people to journey through Najaf province alone.

IRAQ VP MAHDI EMPHASIZED PRIVATE SECTOR DEVELOPMENT, COMMITMENT TO THE CONSTITUTION

14. (SBU) During VP Mahdi's meeting with Najaf officials, Governor Gilel stated that the VP emphasized the importance of focus on private sector development, and a strong commitment to the Constitution. The Governor highlighted, for example, the "Ready-to-Wear" business suit that he was wearing. Ready-to-Wear is a state-owned enterprise that the Brinkley

HILLAH 00000015 002.2 OF 002

Group and PRT are supporting and helping to understand the international market to sell its products overseas. The Governor would like to see more support for private companies, and lamented the emphasis on traditional state-owned enterprise during Saddam's times, at the expense of the private sector. He also blamed Saddam for the failure of the Trade Ministry. Secondly, the Governor stated that the VP asked Najaf officials to "respect and remain committed to the Constitution." In the same breath, the Governor expressed confidence that the Provincial Council Draft Law would pass, and that there would be elections later this year.

15. (C) COMMENT: We have observed a steady stream of senior GOI officials traveling to Najaf of late, which is not surprising given Najaf's importance to the national body politic. These have included among others, Kurdistan Prime Minister Barzani, Prime Minister Maliki, Vice President Mahdi, and President Talibani on February 9, two days subsequent to the PRT's meeting. Often, such visits have included an audience with the Grand Ayatollah. The Governor on occasion passes to the PRT tidbits from these close-hold meetings, which gives us confidence that al-Sistani is generally aware of the PRT's activities in Najaf province. END COMMENT
SIMMONS